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AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: Muslim Engagement in Greece

REF: 09 STATE 127215; 09 ATHENS 901; 09 ATHENS 1685

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel V. Speckhard, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (U) This report is a response to reftel information request and is a joint cable with Consulate General Thessaloniki.

12. (C) SUMMARY: Mission Greece has a multifaceted Muslim outreach strategy encompassing public diplomacy programming, human rights and religious freedom advocacy, outreach to immigrant organizations, and partnerships with civil society. Greece has two completely distinct Muslim populations: the Muslim minority, which has resided in Thrace since Ottoman times and comprises ethnic Turks, Pomaks, and Roma; and a largely urban community of Muslim migrants, composed of recent economic immigrants from Albania, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Post uses a different engagement strategy for each population. Outreach to the Muslim minority, led by Consulate General Thessaloniki, focuses on exchange programs, civil society partnerships, minority rights, and cultural programming. Outreach to Muslim immigrants, overseen by Embassy Athens, centers on partnerships with immigrant and Muslim organizations, advocacy on religious freedom and refugee issues, and fostering host government-Muslim migrant dialogue. Mission Greece takes advantage of EUR resources on Muslim engagement and would welcome additional funding and programming support. END SUMMARY.

Background: Two Different Muslim Populations

13. (C) The Muslim minority of Thrace and the Muslim immigrant community in Greece are two different populations that differ in history, organization, and on their community priorities. The two populations rarely intermingle; in fact, our Muslim contacts note that there is distrust between the two sides. (See REF B.) The Muslim minority, composed of ethnic Turk, Pomak (a Slavic ethnicity), and Roma communities, lives mainly in the northeastern region of Thrace, and has a population of approximately 100,000 to 120,000. For Greece's Muslim immigrants, both legal and illegal, government officials estimate a population of 600,000 to 700,000

Albanians and over 200,000 from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Greece's total population is approximately 11.2 million (2008, World Bank).

14. (C) The Muslim minority of Greece has lived in Thrace since early Ottoman times and is one of Europe's oldest indigenous Muslim populations. It enjoys specific legal rights under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne between Greece and Turkey. In Greece, the term "Muslim minority" and "minority rights" mean something more than an ethnic or religious minority with universal human rights--instead, they refer to a national minority with specific community-based rights that the government must protect per the treaty. As a result, the Greek government provides bilingual Greek-Turkish education, appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim religious leaders, allows mosques and wakfs to operate, and officially recognizes Shari'a in family law. Historical tensions between Greece and Turkey as well as Balkan identity politics have made Muslim minority issues particularly sensitive, with Turkey and Greece jockeying for influence over education, religious freedom, and ethnic identity issues. (See the Human Rights Report for Greece for more details.)

15. (C) Muslim immigrants generally comprise two groups: a largely Arab, economically settled, and legal population (Egyptian, Syrian,

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Lebanese), many of whom settled in Greece in the 1970s and 80s; and more recent migrants from Middle East conflict zones (Iraq, Iran, and Palestine), South Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), and Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria)--a significant proportion without legal status. These migrants started arriving in Greece in the 1990s and collectively comprise nearly half of illegal immigration into the country today. They are less economically settled, less educated, more devout, and according to Greek experts and local Muslim leaders, more susceptible to radicalization. While some of these migrants have gained legal residency through periodic government amnesty programs, many have no legal status and are subject to deportation. There are many Muslim immigrant organizations, generally divided along ethnic and/or national lines. Some are officially registered NGOs, while others are informal groups. Likewise, Muslim immigrants tend to worship in small prayer rooms divided along ethnic and sectarian lines.

16. (C) Greece is now considered the main gateway into Europe for Muslim migrants and refugees from the East. Greece's Muslim immigrant population thus shows parallels to Western Europe Muslim immigrant communities, but are years behind in terms of integration. Greece's Muslim immigrants are more recently arrived, less socioeconomically settled, and more transitory than Muslims in Western Europe; many see Greece as a springboard to countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. While these Muslim migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa are more visible, the largest immigrant population is Albanian, numbering 600,000-700,000. Most Albanians are nominally Muslim but few are devout, and immigrant NGOs comment that many Albanians convert to Orthodoxy and take on Greek names to facilitate integration. (See REF C for more information on immigration into Greece.)

Muslim Engagement Strategy and Goals

16. (SBU) Given the many differences between the official Muslim minority and the Muslim immigrant populations, Mission Greece has an engagement strategy for each:

17. (C) ENGAGEMENT WITH THE OFFICIAL MUSLIM MINORITY: Consulate General Thessaloniki leads outreach to the Muslim minority of Thrace, with a focus on exchange programs, civil society partnerships, human rights, and cultural programming. Post maintains close ties with many Muslim minority organizations, including Turk, Pomak, and Roma NGOs. These relationships provide a substantial network of contacts and foster robust U.S. exchange programs, educational outreach to Muslim youth, and cooperation with the Muslim minority media. Mission Greece believes that the Muslim minority of Greece, as one of Europe's oldest Muslim populations, can be a leading example of a vibrant and integrated community that is both European and Muslim. Specific goals include:

-- Continue to partner with the Muslim minority and the Greek government on minority rights issues. Due to the sensitive identity politics in Thrace, any alleged mistreatment of the Muslim minority is used as a rallying point against European governments on some Muslim websites. In order to mitigate this effect, Consulate General Thessaloniki and Embassy Athens regularly discuss human rights and religious freedom issues with members of the Muslim minority and Greek government officials and encourage increased dialogue between these stakeholders.

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-- Expand Muslim-oriented public diplomacy programming. We hope to expand outreach activities at the American Corner in Xanthi--a city whose population is 40 percent Muslim minority--to focus on Muslims, using best practices and resources from other posts and Washington. In addition, increase Muslim participation in initiatives such as the Transatlantic Studies Seminars and University Internships.

-- Members of the Muslim minority lag behind ethnic Greeks in education. Post engages with the Muslim minority on education in several ways: through the American Corner in Xanthi, fostering U.S. exchange programs for Muslim researchers, using internships and seminars for youth outreach, and discussing education policy with Muslim minority and government policymakers.

18. (C) ENGAGEMENT WITH MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS: Embassy Athens oversees outreach to Muslim immigrants, the majority of whom reside in Athens, and this engagement centers on partnerships with immigrant and Muslim organizations, advocacy on religious freedom and refugee issues, and fostering host government-Muslim immigrant dialogue. The main strategic goals: 1) Partner with the Greek government on how to facilitate integration, drawing lessons from the U.S. experience; 2) advance Greek progress on migrant rights and religious freedom, especially with Muslims; and 3) foster positive perceptions and interactions between Muslim immigrants and Americans. Engagement with Muslim immigrants is a collaborative effort between the Embassy's POL and PD Sections, as well as between Embassy Athens and Consulate General Thessaloniki. Specific goals include:

-- Assess the Greek government's current strategy and capabilities in Muslim integration, outreach, and counter-radicalization. Establish relationships with government agencies and explore opportunities for joint engagement activities. Seek ways to incorporate a Muslim engagement component into U.S. training and exchange programs for Greek officials.

-- Expand the Mission's network of contacts in the Muslim immigrant

community, building ties with a wide variety of Muslim organizations, and gaining the trust of Muslim immigrant leaders. Over the last year, Post has established new relationships with leaders from the Egyptian, Pakistani, Moroccan, Iraqi, and Sudanese communities in Athens. Consulate General Thessaloniki plans to expand its contact base among immigrant Muslims in northern Greece.

-- Enhance Muslim immigrant-focused public diplomacy programming: explore opportunities for American Muslim speaker programs, exchange programs, and cultural and arts outreach. Embassy Athens plans to partner with immigrant organizations to provide English teaching resources. Focus on youth audiences and leverage Post's youth-oriented website, mosaiko.gr.

-- Extend existing Embassy and Consulate General Ramadan iftar dinner programs beyond Muslim elites and leaders to the "grassroots" level for Muslim migrants.

-- Continue advocacy on human rights and religious freedom issues of interest to Muslims, in order to build trust and open doors for new partnerships with Muslim immigrant communities. Key issues include advocating for an officially-recognized mosque and Muslim

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cemetery in Athens, better rights for migrants and asylum seekers, and increased social dialogue with and acceptance of Muslim immigrants by Greeks.

-- Coordinate with posts in other European countries, as well as Washington, to identify Muslim engagement and integration best practices. Collaborate with other local Embassies on Muslim immigrant outreach.

Best Practices and Outreach Highlights

¶10. (C) Based on our experience, a key factor to success in Muslim engagement is the importance of patient and consistent relationship-building, across the full spectrum of Muslim interlocutors. In order to maintain these relationships, Mission Greece uses a combination of regular public diplomacy programming, major events (such as the yearly iftar dinner), and frequent visits to Muslim NGOs, leaders, and community members. In particular, U.S. exchange programs are a sure way to cement partnerships with Muslim contacts. With patient relationship-building, our Muslim contacts regularly reciprocate by inviting us to events, providing information into community dynamics, and enhancing our human rights reporting on refugee, migration, and religious freedom issues with "on the ground" insights.

¶11. (C) U.S. advocacy on human rights and religious freedom issues of interest to Muslims is another important way to engage. Mission Greece's focus on issues of concern to the Muslim minority in Thrace as well as Muslim immigrants has built up a sense of trust; this strategy also underscores the U.S. role as a leader on human rights issues. While our Muslim contacts note that broader global issues are important, such as peace in the Middle East and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, partnership on local issues--such as improving education for the Muslim minority, or building a mosque

for Athens--are important bridge-builders.

¶12. (C) The following are a few selected highlights from Mission Greece's outreach activities:

-- Iftar Dinner Outreach: Embassy Athens and Consulate General Thessaloniki hosted separate iftar dinners in September 2009, drawing in Muslim community leaders and diplomats, government officials, and representatives from other religious faiths. The iftar in Thessaloniki focused on the Muslim minority of Thrace, while Embassy Athens showcased a video presentation of President Obama's Ramadan speech. Ambassador Speckhard was also invited to an iftar hosted by Muslim immigrant leaders--the first time the Muslim migrant community has reached out to the Embassy in such a way.

-- Muslim Media Outreach: The Thessaloniki Consulate General gave interviews to a variety of Muslim minority media, from a Greek-Turkish bilingual political journal to a Turkish-language radio station. CG staff also met regularly with Pomak news editors and were featured in a Roma newspaper. For the International Day of Tolerance, the CG drafted an editorial, which was signed by the top Muslim and Orthodox clerics of Xanthi in both 2007 and 2008. This effort broke new ground in interfaith dialogue in northern

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Greece.

-- Outreach to Roma: Embassy Athens visited ten separate Roma camps during 2009, discussing education strategies with teachers, collaborating with Roma NGO leaders, and meeting with Roma community members of both Greek and Albanian geographic origin. Consulate General Thessaloniki reached out to women Roma leaders, in a predominately Christian camp, to discuss their battle against illiteracy, poor health, poverty, and unemployment. CG staff subsequently visited a Muslim Roma village and met with NGO members to discuss language education and strategies for boosting school attendance. Both the Embassy and Consulate General held events for International Roma Day that brought together NGO leaders, Roma community members, and government officials.

-- Partnering on the Athens Mosque: Ambassador Speckhard partnered with the leaders of the Muslim Association of Greece to engage the government on starting the much-delayed construction of an officially-approved mosque for Athens. Athens is one of the few European capitals without a single approved mosque, and this situation angers the Muslim community and drives Muslim worshippers underground, into prayer rooms with less-educated clerics.

-- Increasing Muslim Participation in U.S. Exchange Programs: Over the last several years, Mission Greece has nominated three Muslim minority candidates for International Visitors Programs and has nominated a Muslim Roma activist for a Transatlantic Studies Seminar.

-- Highlighting Immigrant and Muslim Women: For two years in a row, Mission Greece has nominated accomplished women from immigrant or Muslim minority groups. Our 2008 Woman of Courage was Sabiha Suleiman, a Muslim Roma activist, who worked tirelessly to increase school attendance, advance education for Roma, and combat gender violence in her community. In 2009, we nominated Valbona Hystuna, an Albanian immigrant advocate for child victims of trafficking,

women migrants, and street children.
Speckhard